



Learning Matters

Summer 2004

Closing the Achievement Gap: A Call to Action

By 2010, South Carolina's student achievement will be ranked in the top half of states nationally. To achieve this goal, we must become one of the five fastest improving systems in the country.

Introduction

At its June 2004 meeting, the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee (EOC) celebrated the accomplishments of 107 elementary and middle schools in which historically under-achieving groups of students had scored either in the top quarter or top tenth of all students statewide. We know the importance of South Carolina's students achieving at high levels—our state's economic well-being depends on school results; our communities thrive socially and culturally when citizens are educated; and our individual lives are enriched by the knowledge and skills we develop in school.

Two groups of students often are left behind in our school improvement efforts. African-American students and students from economically disadvantaged homes struggle in our schools and do not score as well as their white or economically advantaged peers.

Among the state's 300,000 third through eighth graders, approximately 57 percent are white and 43 percent are African-American students. Fifty-two percent of these students participate in the free-reduced price lunch program; 48 percent pay for lunch. The numbers

dramatize the need for school improvement efforts that reach every student.

The EOC completed its second annual study on the achievement gap. The study examines student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the state's Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests, noting similar patterns among the performance of different student demographic groups. Other reports affirm that the achievement gap persists in performance on the state's exit exam, the SAT and the ACT.

The study, *Performance of Historically Underachieving Groups of Students in South Carolina Elementary and Middle Schools: A Call to Action*, focuses on four areas:

- current and projected gaps in performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP),
- comparison of 2002 and 2003 performance on the Palmetto Achievement Challenge tests,
- the degree to which a gap exists among school ratings categories, and
- the recognition of 107 schools that are making progress in closing the achievement gap.

Finding Number 1

Current and projected gaps in performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

The NAEP achievement levels of students disaggregated by race and economic status between 1998 and the present were examined. The study projects future NAEP performance by applying the rate of improvement between 2000 and 2003 in mathematics and between 1998 and 2003 in reading. The data demonstrate strong gains in mathematics performance to date; however, students within different groups are not gaining at the same rate and we can expect to see the achievement gap widen at the proficient and advanced performance level (Figures 1 through 4).

Finding Number 1 (Continued)

Figure 1: SC NAEP Grade 4 Math (% Proficient or Advanced) *White vs. African-American Students*

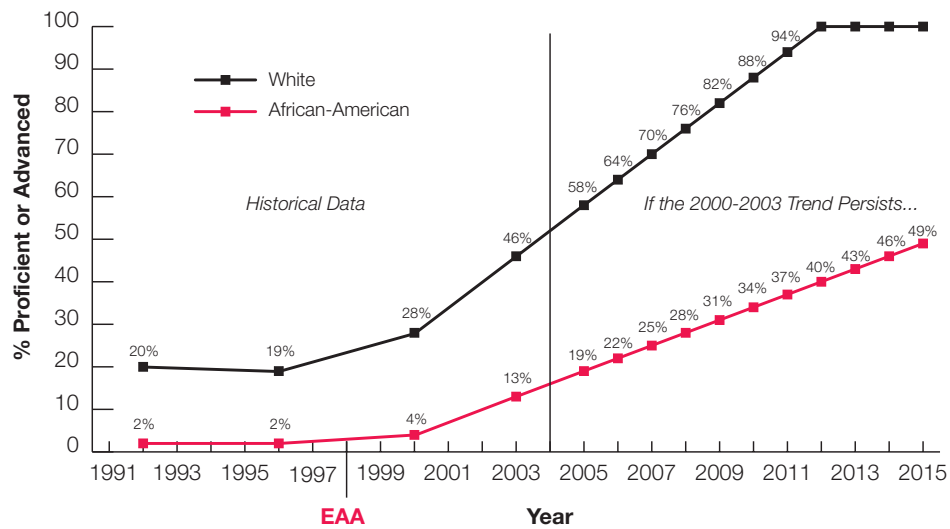


Figure 2: SC NAEP Grade 8 Math (% Proficient or Advanced) *White vs. African-American Students*

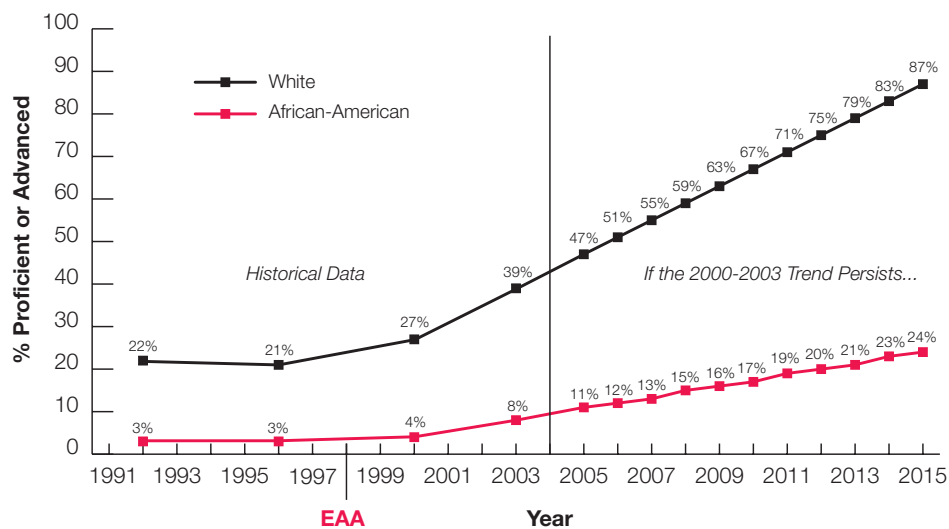
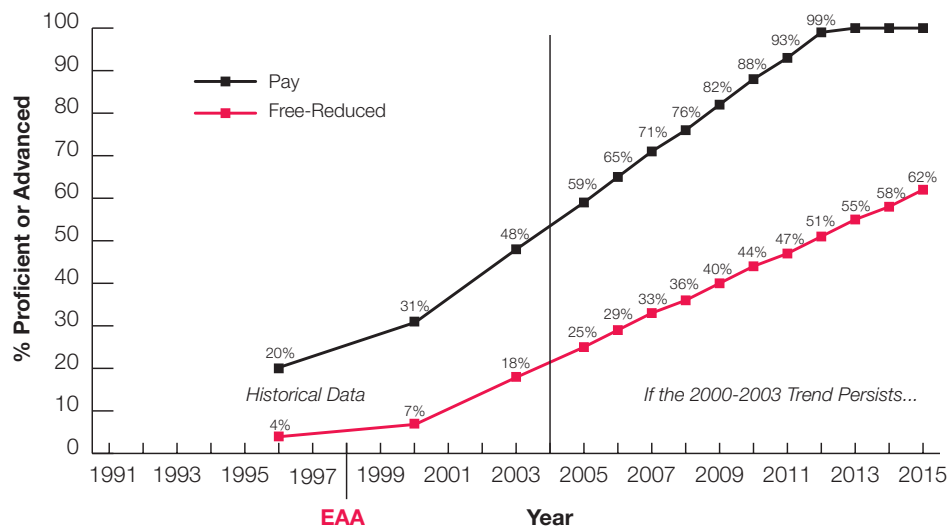
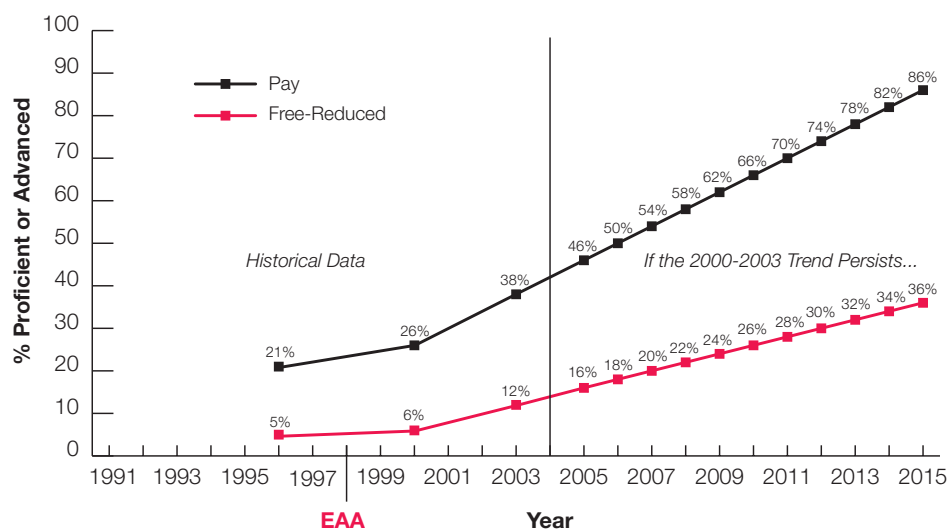


Figure 3: SC NAEP Grade 4 Math (% Proficient or Advanced) *Pay vs. Free-Reduced Lunch*



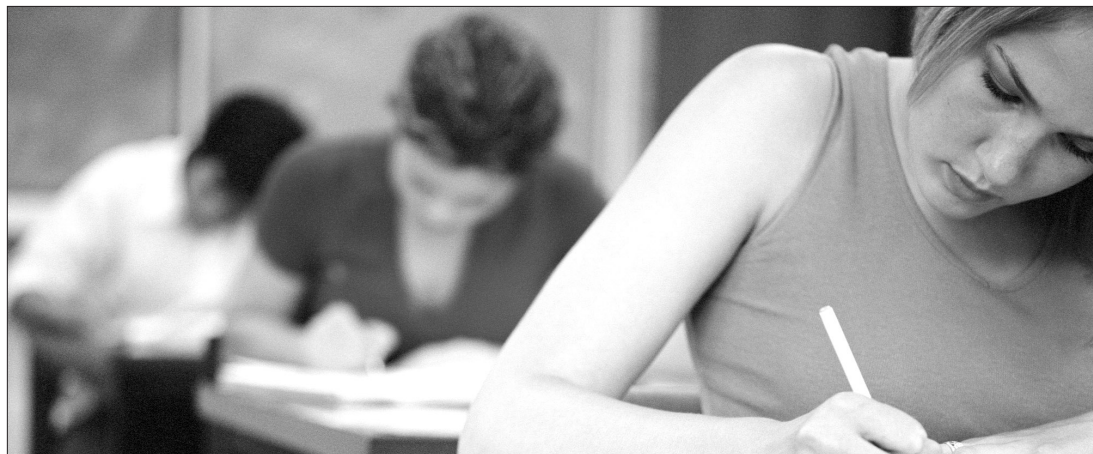
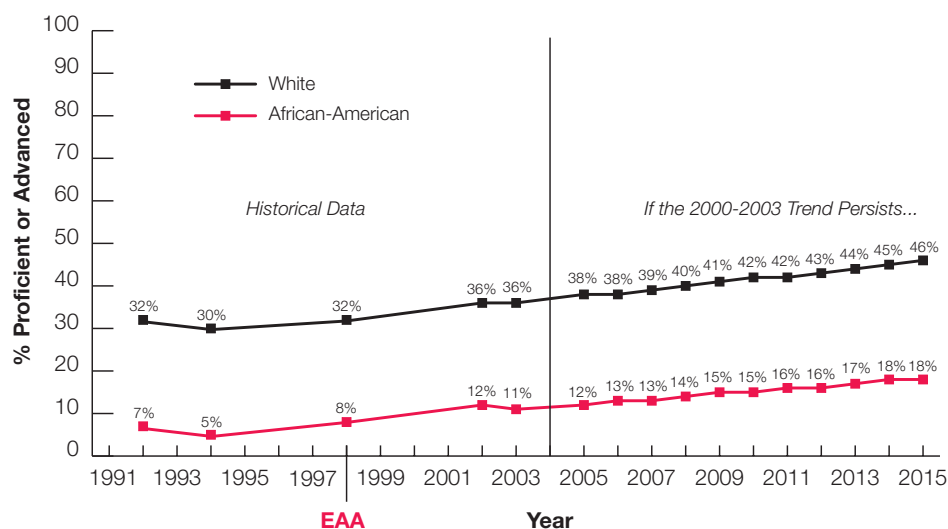
Finding Number 1 (Continued)

Figure 4: SC NAEP Grade 8 Math (% Proficient or Advanced) *Pay vs. Free-Reduced Lunch*



Student performance on NAEP reading is less encouraging as is displayed in Figures 5 through 8. Performance is particularly low at the proficient and advanced levels, a finding not dissimilar from the results on other assessments (e.g., PACT, SAT, ACT).

Figure 5: SC NAEP Grade 4 Reading (% Proficient or Advanced) *White vs. African-American Students*



Finding Number 1 (Continued)

Figure 6: SC NAEP 8 Grade Reading (% Proficient or Advanced) *White vs. African-American Students*

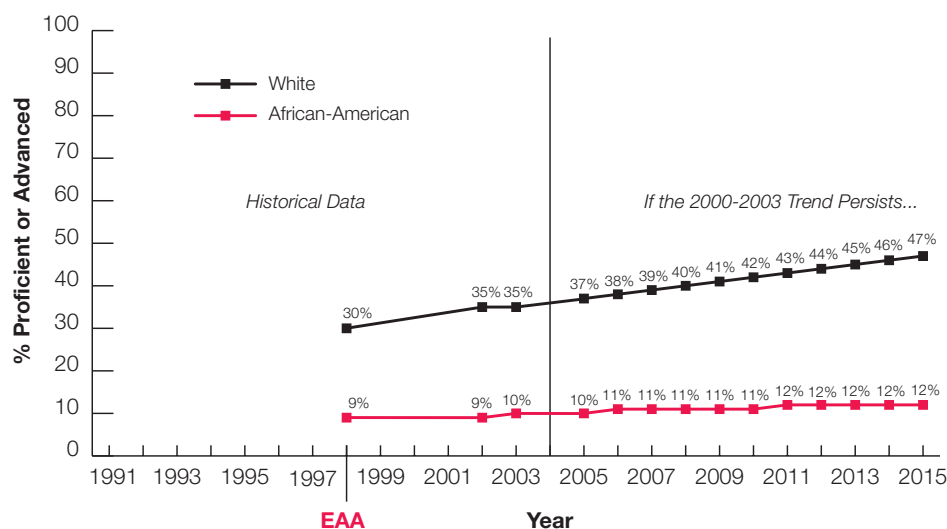


Figure 7: SC NAEP Grade 4 Reading (% Proficient or Advanced) *Pay vs. Free-Reduced Lunch*

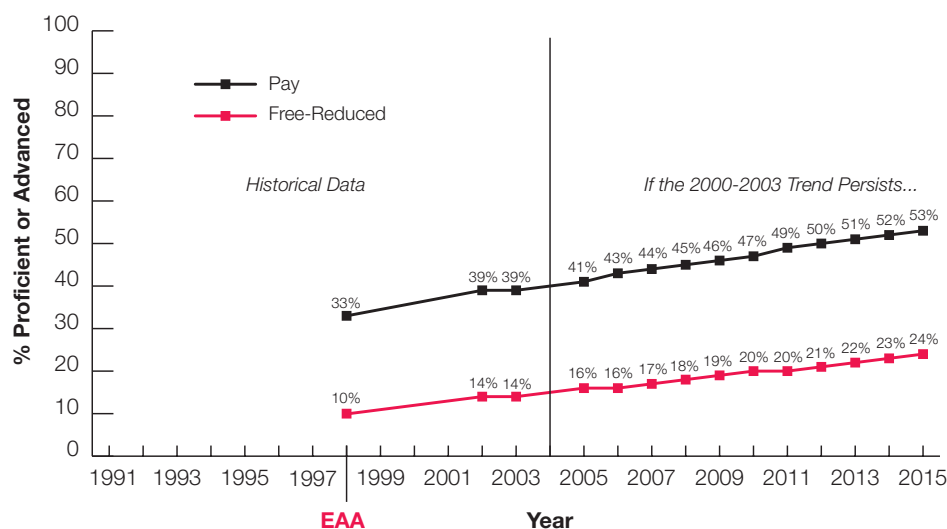
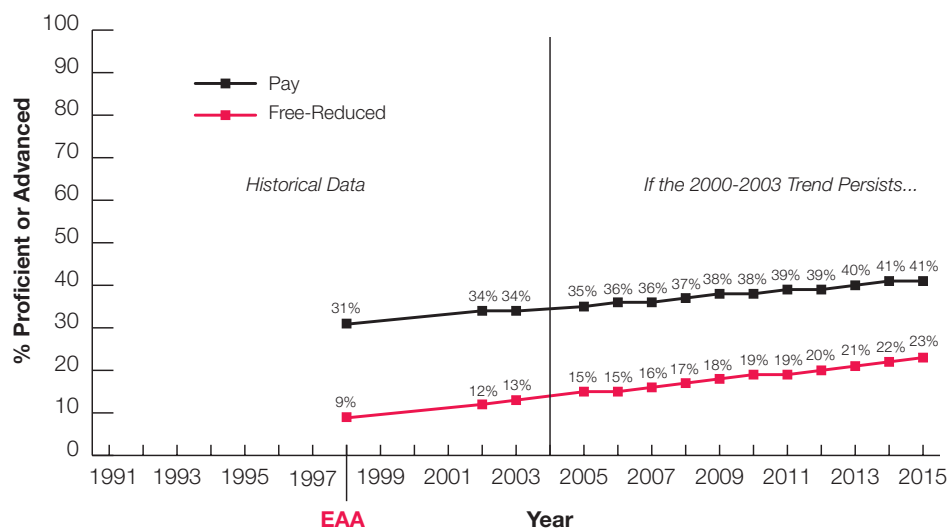


Figure 8: SC NAEP Grade 8 Reading (% Proficient or Advanced) *Pay vs. Free-Reduced Lunch*



Finding Number 1

(Continued)

Education Trust, an advocacy group for school reform and high achievement among all students, has completed extensive analyses of NAEP data. The Education Trust researchers suggest that ten scale score points represent a year of learning. Their work, displayed in Table 1 below, highlights the gap in South Carolina. Note that the South Carolina gap is slightly smaller than the gap nationwide.

Table 1: SC and US NAEP Scale Score Gaps Between White and African-American Students

Year, Grade Level, and Subject Tested	South Carolina		United States	
	SC Gap Between White and African American Students in Scale Score Points	Approximate Number of Years of Learning That SC African American Students Score Behind SC White Students	United States Gap Between White and African American Students in Scale Score Points	Approximate Number of Years of Learning That US African American Students Score Behind US White Students
2003 Grade 4 Reading	27	2.7	30	3.0
2003 Grade 8 Reading	25	2.5	27	2.7
2003 Grade 4 Math	24	2.4	27	2.7
2003 Grade 8 Math	33	3.3	35	3.5
2000 Grade 4 Science	34	3.4	35	3.5
2000 Grade 8 Science	33	3.3	39	3.9
2002 Grade 4 Writing	17	1.7	20	2.0
2002 Grade 8 Writing	20	2.0	25	2.5

Source: Education Trust Education Watch: Achievement Gap Summary Tables, 2004

Finding Number 2

Comparison of 2002 and 2003 performance on the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests (PACT)

When we consider the impact of economic factors on a student's life, it is not surprising that students in the pay lunch category tend to score at higher performance levels. 2002 and 2003 PACT results are displayed in Table 2. The data demonstrate gains in mathematics across student groups and performance categories. Gains at the proficient and advanced score levels are lower than at the basic performance level. In English language arts there are declines in performance between 2002 and 2003 across all student groups as well as the performance categories. In mathematics the gap is narrowing for the group of students scoring basic and above, but widening at the proficient and advanced levels. Gaps at the basic and above levels are widening on the English language arts assessment. The gap narrows at the higher performance levels, but only because performance of all students declined.

Table 2: 2002 and 2003 PACT Results By Demographic Group

Demographic Group	ELA						Math					
	% Basic or Above			% Proficient or Advanced			% Basic or Above			% Proficient or Advanced		
	2002	2003	Diff.	2002	2003	Diff.	2002	2003	Diff.	2002	2003	Diff.
All Students	74.7	70.5	-4.2	31.2	27.3	-3.9	68.2	73.8	+5.6	28.6	29.6	+1.0
White	84.8	81.1	-3.7	42.9	37.8	-5.1	80.4	84.9	+4.5	40.2	41.7	+1.5
African-American	61.2	57.2	-4.0	15.3	13.6	-1.7	51.6	59.4	+7.8	12.7	13.4	+0.7
Free/Reduced Lunch	63.3	58.9	-4.4	16.7	14.6	-2.1	55.4	63.0	+7.6	15.2	16.1	+0.9
Pay Lunch	86.9	83.5	-3.4	46.4	41.4	-5.0	81.8	85.9	+4.1	42.8	44.5	+1.7

Source: SC Department of Education

Diff. = 2003 - 2002

Finding Number 3

The degree to which a gap exists among school ratings categories.

There often is a perception that all students in high-scoring schools are doing well. When data are reported for all students, the performance of groups is masked. PACT performances for the different student demographic groups were analyzed at the school level and their results combined within the 2003 school ratings categories. As data displayed in Figures 9 and 10 indicate, the gap persists across all school ratings categories.

Figure 9: 2003 PACT ELA Percent Proficient or Advanced

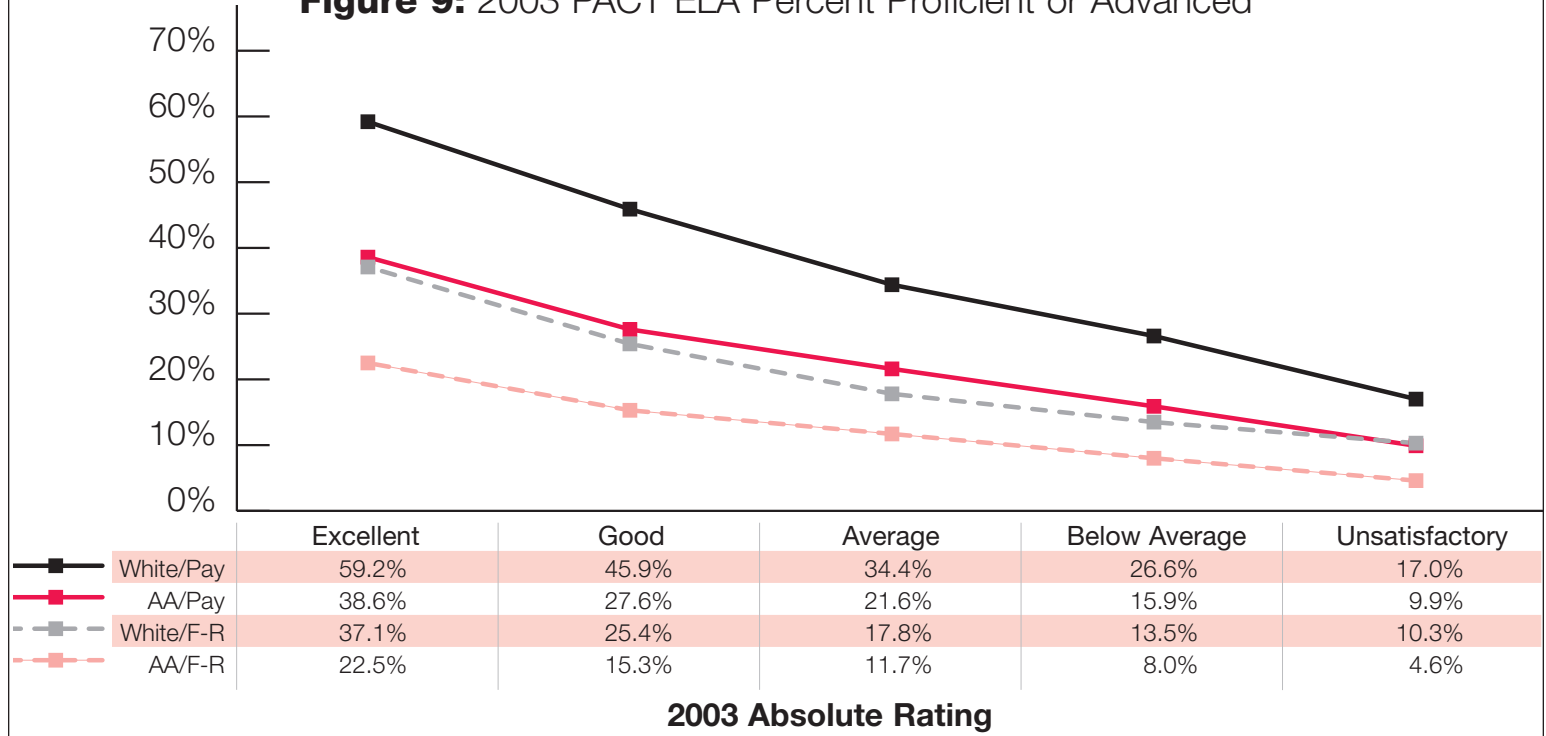
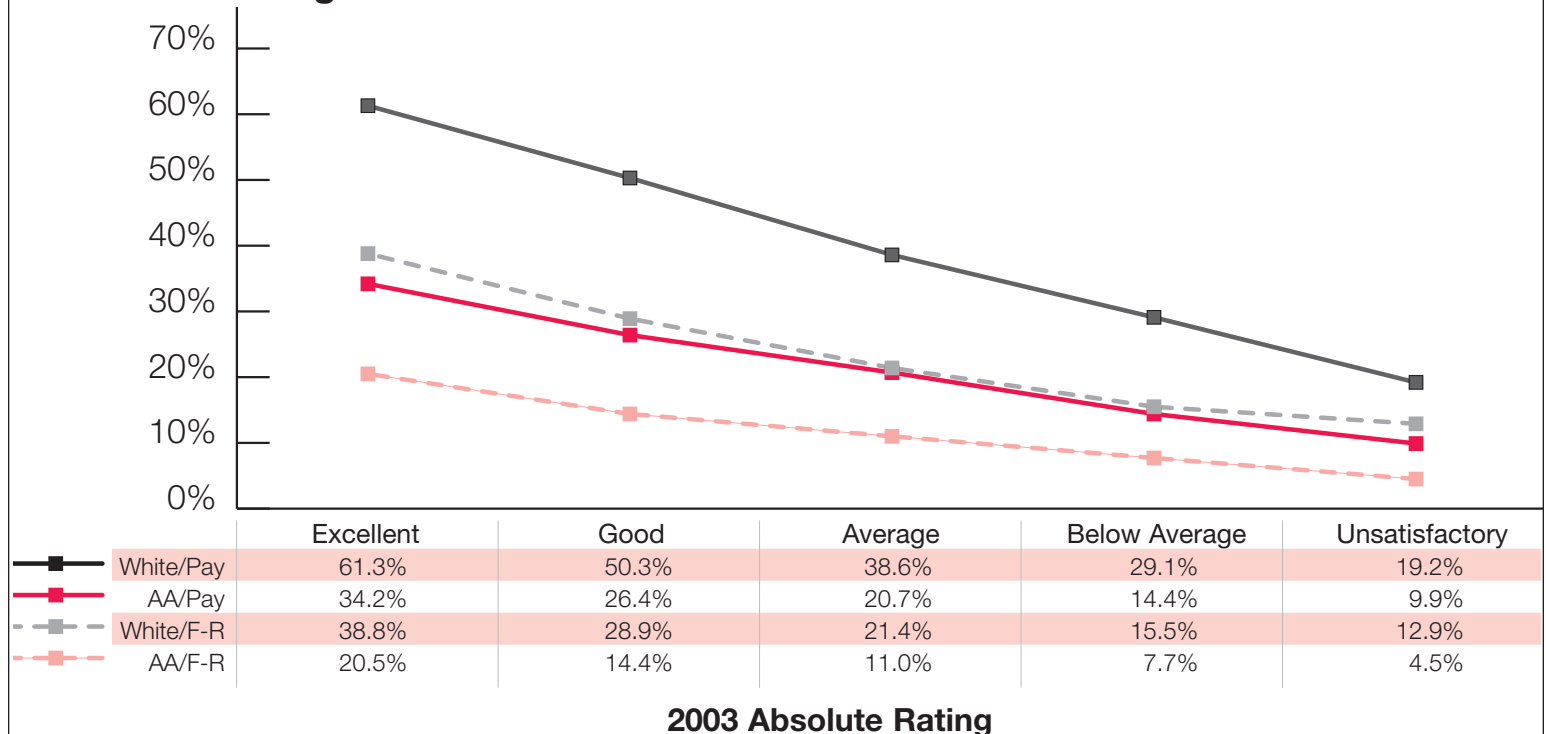


Figure 10: 2003 PACT Math Percent Proficient or Advanced



Finding Number 3 *(Continued)*

Several key observations can be made from these figures:

- In keeping with the ratings calculation, schools with the highest performance are rated Excellent; those with the lowest performance are rated Unsatisfactory;
- The gap for students scoring at the proficient or advanced levels is largest in schools rated Excellent and smallest in schools rated Unsatisfactory;
- In schools rated Below Average, fewer than one in ten African-American students participating in the free/reduced price lunch program scored Proficient or Advanced; and
- In schools rated Unsatisfactory, only one in twenty African-American students participating in the free/reduced price lunch program scored Proficient or Advanced.

Finding Number 4

Recognition of 107 schools that are making progress in closing the achievement gap.



The EOC found good news as well. Recent improvements on mathematics assessments indicate strong performance and some progress in closing the gap on the PACT. Among the state's 807 elementary and middle schools in the study, 107 schools are closing the gap in at least one content area for at least one group of students. This is an increase over the 87 schools recognized last year. Fifty-five schools are recognized for the second consecutive year. The EOC analysis employs eight possible criteria for recognition. Twenty-one schools meet four or more of the criteria. Some schools are exceeding that.

An examination of the school profile information, as reported on the 2003 annual school report cards, found that the recognized schools were similar to schools rated Good or Excellent on most factors. Strikingly, the recognized schools reported higher levels of satisfaction by teachers, students and parents on the survey data which evaluates home-school relations, school learning environment and social and physical environment.





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Recommendations

There is no doubt that the large achievement gaps currently evident in our assessment results are unacceptable. A number of advocacy groups and task forces have documented the lifelong impact of under educating significant groups of students – for the students and for the entire state. The EOC recommends the following actions:

- Implement the African-American Student Achievement Committee recommendations.
(available on www.myschools.com)
- Focus attention on those students falling behind in school and provide for their needs as outlined in the Education Accountability Act to include increased instructional time for these students; clear effective academic assistance plans; literacy development among young children; and preschool intervention programs.
- Provide for the health and safety of children, with special attention to those who lack access to quality health care.
- Provide strong interventions to reduce the academic weaknesses of students entering high school.

South Carolina's future depends on the success of all its children. We must assign higher priority to the future of these children than to the comfort of the traditional. As former EOC chairman Bill Barnet has said, "The risk of inertia is greater than the risk of innovation."

The complete study is available at www.sceoc.org

Readers are encouraged to visit the 107 schools and learn from their successes.